

A CLOSER LOOK

Story by Ron Wilson



Rainbow smelt in the Missouri River System spawn in shallow water, at night, when the water temperature warms into the mid-40s.

Temperature Sensitive

It's already begun, but we don't notice it because it's taking place under water. It's the annual race to produce offspring, to recruit new members that swim in North Dakota waters and sometimes bite baited hooks.

The many different species of fish in North Dakota spawn at different times, and, for the most part, in dissimilar habitats. It starts with ling – aka eelpout, burbot, mud blower, freshwater cod – sometime in January or February under ice. The water is a frigid 33-35 degrees Fahrenheit when females migrate to sandy shallows to cast thousands of eggs.

Immediately after ice out as waters warm to 40-52 degrees, northern pike nose into shallow water where females lay sticky eggs that adhere to emergent vegetation. Eggs hatch in roughly 12-14 days, if they make it that far at all. Pike eggs, like other fish eggs in the wild, fall prey to insects, fish and other predators ... and sometimes wild springtime weather.

In late April or early May, yellow perch, rainbow smelt and walleye take their turn. The water is anywhere from 44-52 degrees. Walleye are the crowd favorite among Northern Plains anglers, while rainbow smelt play the quiet, but vital role as forage for other bigger fish in the Missouri River System.

Spawning takes place under the cover of darkness for the light sensitive rainbow smelt. Adult fish gather in 12 inches of water or less, where the female will lay eggs among rocks that are fist-sized or bigger. The female will sometimes deposit as few as 50 eggs, leave, and return later to do it all over again.

Sometime in May or June, sauger and white bass spawn in North Dakota. Water temperatures for sauger – males arrive at spawning grounds first in anticipation of females – is 50-55 degrees. For white bass, it's 55-60 degrees.

It's late spring or summer before crappie, bluegill, smallmouth and largemouth bass sweep out well-guarded spawning nests that, depending on the species, resemble dinner plates. Waters have now warmed to 55-70 degrees. At these temperatures it seems like forever ago that ling kicked things off under ice.

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